



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S HOLISTIC APPROACH TO DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT

Key messages

The past decade has seen the United Kingdom's government continue to evolve its strategy of "doing development in a digital world" from a sectoral lens towards a more holistic and comprehensive approach. The most recent digital development policy framework developed by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) takes a cross-cutting view of digital as a key enabler of development, with a focus on digital inclusion, transformation, responsibility and sustainability.

This content, alongside its companion on the [UK's Digital Access Programme](#), is part of [In Practice series on digital transformation](#) developed in collaboration with the [Development Co-operation Report 2021: Shaping a Just Digital Transformation](#).

Keywords

[Development awareness](#) | [Digital transformation](#) | [Innovation](#) | [Partnerships](#) | [Policy and guidance](#) | [Poverty and inequality](#)

Key partner

[United Kingdom](#)

Challenge

By the mid-2010s, the United Kingdom's former Department for International Development (DfID) had accumulated over a decade's worth of experience in applying digital approaches to its sectoral programmes, notably in health, education, agriculture, financial services and humanitarian interventions, with some significant impact. For example, it supported the digital innovation process that led to [M-Pesa's mobile money revolution](#) in Kenya, which subsequently went global. However, DfID did not yet have a comprehensive and coherent approach to digital development, with advisory knowledge and practical experience for programme design and delivery being concentrated in just a few thematic areas. DfID needed to address the challenge of defining a holistic, comprehensive approach to digital development as a cross-cutting enabler of economic and social development in partner

countries. This strategic shift was also needed to raise digital development awareness and capability across multiple teams and layers of the organisation.

Approach

DfID's 2018-2020 Strategy "[Doing Development in a Digital World](#)" focused on better use of digital technologies to amplify programme impact and enhance value for money in sectors such as education, financial inclusion, health and agriculture. It advocated for the adoption of the [International Digital Principles](#) and highlighted the importance of the "leave no-one behind" agenda. It also covered the internal digital transformation of DfID.

DfID created a dedicated policy and programming team covering "digital, emerging technologies and innovation for development". The team organically evolved from a cabinet-style advisory function to a unit housing most of the digital, technology and innovation expertise. Its digital sub-team focused on raising awareness of digital development, conducting diagnostics and research, consulting internally and externally, and elaborating on emerging evidence of digital development interventions.

The implementation of the strategy generated insights, built awareness and capacity in the organisation, and highlighted the need for a more integrated, holistic approach. In September 2020, the DfID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) merged to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Since then, the FCDO has worked to incorporate lessons learnt from the implementation of the first digital development strategy into its new policy framework. The refreshed digital development policy framework takes a more cross-cutting view of digital as a key enabler of development, and has identified four strategic objectives:

- **Digital inclusion:** promoting inclusive and affordable connectivity, basic digital literacy and skills, and locally-relevant digital content or services for underserved communities – with an emphasis on gender, disability, remote location and other exclusion factors.
- **Digital transformation:** supporting the broad processes of digital transformation of government, the economy and society in partner countries.
- **Digital responsibility:** ensuring that engaging with digital technologies is safe and secure for populations in partner countries, and that capacity is built to manage the risks and challenges, threats and harms that cyber space can present.
- **Digital sustainability:** reducing the environmental costs of digital technologies and infrastructure, while leveraging digital approaches to strengthen local capacity for climate change resilience and adaptation.

Results

- **A refreshed FCDO digital development policy framework**, which is expected to underpin a future digital development strategy. This is aimed to provide guidance for the newly merged department on how to address digital development while also highlighting its relevance to wider objectives of the UK government.
- **Increased awareness** amongst DfID's and FCDO's policy teams and overseas network of the role of digital technologies in enabling economic and social development in partner countries.
- **The identification, design and delivery of new interventions**, including a new portfolio of programmes aimed at promoting models and enablers of inclusive, responsible and sustainable digital transformation. These include cross-government collaboration and new partnerships with local and international stakeholders in digital development to support country-level and cross-country work.

Lessons learnt

- **The importance of systematic awareness-raising** through policy and strategy work, and by showcasing examples with senior leaders and across relevant teams in the organisation. The focus should be on the importance of digital development as a cross-cutting enabler of economic and social development, moving from a sectoral approach to a comprehensive framework of interdependent, foundational elements of digital inclusion, transformation, responsibility and sustainability.
- **Building in-house advisory capability dedicated to digital development**, through a central policy and expert team that guides and supports sectoral teams and overseas missions in line with the overall strategy, while facilitating knowledge sharing and good practice. The ambition should be to grow a network of digital development champions, advisers and policy/programme managers to help the organisation better mainstream digital approaches.
- **Identifying, building and leveraging strategic policy and knowledge partnerships** (e.g. with academia and with specialised local and international organisations) to ensure the organisation stays at the cutting edge of a rapidly changing digital climate, using its holistic approach as an opportunity to collaborate and accelerate efforts to support digital transformation in partner countries. This is particularly important during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic where access to digital technologies, information and services has become vital for all populations, including those at risk of being left behind.
- **Maintaining a flexible approach**. Given the rapid evolution of the digital sector and the evolving priorities of government, it is useful to have a policy framework or a strategy that outlines the approach and indicates the direction of travel, without setting rigid targets.

Further information

Department for International Development (2018), *Digital Strategy 2018-2020: Doing Development in a Digital World*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/701443/DFID-Digital-Strategy-23-01-18a.pdf.

Harford, T. (2017), "Money via mobile: The M-Pesa revolution", *BBC World Service, 50 Things That Made the Modern Economy*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-38667475>.

Principles for Digital Development, <https://digitalprinciples.org>.

OECD resources

OECD (2021), *Development Co-operation Report 2021: Shaping a Just Digital Transformation*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ce08832f-en>.

To learn more about United Kingdom's development co-operation see:

OECD (2021), "United Kingdom", in *Development Co-operation Profiles*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ff4da321-en>.

OECD (2020), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: United Kingdom 2020*, OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/43b42243-en>.

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